

## The Crier Dog Days

In the winter of 1925, after the ice on Norton Sound froze the town in for the winter, leaving it inaccessible except for by dogsled, Curtis Welch, the city of Nome, Alaska's only doctor, discovered that the supply of diphtheria antitoxin he had ordered had not arrived. Welch hoped for the best, but soon enough, children were showing signs of the disease, well-feared by nineteenth-century parents, whose trademarks included the growth of a choking, viscous membrane in the throat. With Nome frozen in, Welch telegraphed the public health department in Washington and asked them for help. In all of Alaska, officials could only find about a third of the amount of serum that Dr. Welch thought would be necessary to save the town's children from the outbreak.

Debates began about how to get it there. Some, including Nome's mayor and Alaska's territorial representative, advocated sending an airplane from Fairbanks, but the governor, Scott Bone, did not trust the new-fangled machine to make it. Instead, Bone decided to rely on the centuries-old technology of dog sleds. He put together a relay race that would bring the serum from Nenana, the closest interior town reachable by railroad, overland to Nome, about six hundred miles away. The trip usually took fifteen days. Twenty expert mushers, with twenty different teams of dogs, did it in five and a half.

The serum run was a hit in the continental United States. Through the 1920s, Americans were becoming accustomed to sports heroes, feats of strength, and sensational tales--in other words, to the modern media circus. (Two years later Charles Lindbergh, after his flight across the Atlantic, would be rewarded with his own dance step.) Correspondents in Nome fed news back to their papers by wireless and telegraph, and newspapers in all parts of the country provided up-to-the-minute coverage of the five-day journey. The public, primed for tales of Alaskan adventures by the Gold Rush, ate it up. Nome's radio station was ordered to be kept open 24 hours a day, because, said the Nome *Daily Nugget*, "due to the increased business engendered by the diphtheria epidemic, the number of messages being received and sent are running into the hundreds daily."

Especially popular was the lead dog of the team, Balto. Writing in the *L.A. Times*, Charles Coke Woods held him up as a counterexample to scold the degenerate spirit of the Jazz Age. "The little lead dog, whose feet were bruised and bleeding, kept hunting the lost trail until he found it. He then nosed about his fallen master's hands and cheeks, saying in a brave dog's language, 'Come on, I've found the trail.' The man of the snows sprang to his feet saying, 'Balto, if you can do it, I can.' That was the spirit that brought the healing serum to the sufferers of Nome."

The driver, Gunnar Kasson (Norwegian immigrant, and the "man of the snows"), brought Balto and his team down to Los Angeles, where they received a key to the city--in the shape of a dog bone--from silent film darling Mary Pickford. The new stars were quickly put into a short movie, "Balto's Dash to Nome," which was filmed near Mt. Rainier. In New York, a collection was taken up in order to get Balto a statue in Central Park, which still stands to this day--bronze Balto, ears perked, looks eager and ready to run. Anchorage and Nome also erected statues in his honor.

"His eyes are not very dark," wrote Albert Payson Terhune, a famous writer of dog stories who met Balto after his feat. "They are as steady and calm as the North Star. There is a spot of white fur on his chest. I went all over him with my fingers, examining the impenetrable mat of coat, the mighty shoulders and the wide and deep chest. His leg bones are twice as big as any ordinary dogs' and his feet are bigger than a St. Bernard's. He is one mass of solid bone

and muscle. But it was his steadfast look I liked most."

But fame was fleeting. Within the year, Balto and his team were sold to a vaudeville producer, and spent a year languishing in sideshows in Los Angeles before a businessman from Cleveland recognized him and made an effort to buy him out of captivity. In a campaign organized by the *Plain Dealer*, the city raised \$2,000 to buy Balto, and the team was installed at the Brookside Zoo. 15,000 people visited them on their first day in residence. There they gave rides to children, pulling groups of them in little carts on Sundays. When this "mass of solid bone and muscle" died in 1933, at age fourteen, he was stuffed and displayed at the Cleveland Museum of Natural History. You can still see him there, distinctive spot of white fur intact, though his North Star eyes have been replaced by glass. You can also, if you like, buy a small, furry copy of his famous body in the museum's gift shop.

White settlers arrived in Alaska during the Gold Rushes of the end of the nineteenth century believing that they, not the Native Alaskans, had been chosen by God to develop the land and resources of the North--a land they saw as an extension of the then-"closed" western frontier and a possible outpost of a northern American empire. Dogs, and dog stories, were important to the mythology of this new American project, read by adults and young boys alike. Jack London's Buck and White Fang were not just uncannily popular characters, they were also the prototype for innumerable books of the first quarter of the century featuring dog protagonists and their "sourdough" (seasoned, hardcore Alaskan) partners in the wild North--books with names like *Wolf Dog*; *Silversheene*, *King of Sled Dogs*; *Husky*, *Co-Pilot of the Pilgrim*; *Silver Chief*, *Dog of the North*; *Rowdy*; *Baldy of Nome*.

Of course, Native Alaskans were the first people to use dogs to pull loads in the region. Fragments of sledge runners have been excavated at Coronation Gulf in the Central Canadian Arctic, a site dated to about 1450. "It appears that the use of the Inuit dog in the polar regions was first developed by the Inuit into an enduring and sustaining relationship that is at least a thousand years old," wrote Professor Ian MacRury in a roundup of scientific evidence surrounding research into ancient Inuit uses of dogs. The Inuit used dogs in different hitching formations--lashing them to the sled in a fan hitch, with each individual dog attached by his own lead, instead of arranging the team along a central line in pairs, as most white mushers have become accustomed to doing.

For white settlers, the adoption of an Indian lifeway called for a certain amount of mental wiggling, necessary to avoid acknowledging that the Native Alaskans could do anything that whites couldn't do better. At a time when dominant ideologies of scientific racism held that whites of Nordic and Anglo lineage represented the peak of human intelligence, the idea of taking a technological and organizational practice like dog sledding from the Native Alaskans was anathema. Although the settlers did revel, to some degree, in what historian Philip Deloria famously called "playing Indian"--the frontispieces of many explorers' memoirs invariably feature the author swathed in full winter furs, gazing off with the properly Arctic thousand-yard stare--they tended not to glorify the culture they found. Americans believed Alaskans to be childlike, trusting, merry, but overall and in every sense *little men*, like Nanook in Robert Flaherty's 1922 documentary *Nanook of the North*. And they were disgusted by their way of life, especially those of the Inuit. They were less than human. They built unhygienic dwellings; ate strange foods such as raw meat and blubber; stole indiscriminately from white men; and cared unnaturally little about the death or suffering of others in their tribes.

And, according to whites, they cared little for their dogs. Rather, they understood their dogs as a tool, a resource, a working animal, and had no time for the anthropomorphizing of canines as pets that white Americans took such pleasure in, snapping up the stories of writers like Albert Payson Terhune. Here was a good way for white dog mushers to point out

the differences between themselves and the Indians, and they drove it home, emphasizing over and over how uncaring the Indians were. Egerton Young, who was a missionary in the Canadian Yukon during the early twentieth century, wrote in 1902 of his Muff, who snapped her collarbone during a trip. Young spent several pages making Muff into a character, telling us of her maternal instincts and her willingness to work when in harness, before shocking us with what happened when Muff injured herself (by working too hard, as these fictional canine paragons so often did): "As a sled dog she was completely worthless to us now. The Indians only thought of the one plan that was the universal one among them when such an accident happened under similar circumstances. That was to kill the dog at once and go on with the thus diminished train...The general way of disposing of a dog thus injured was to have one of the Indians kill him with one swift blow of the heavy axe."

Young valiantly prevents this fate. "'Put up your axe,' I almost shouted. 'That may be your way but it is not mine. Muff is not going to be killed if I can help it.'" The group does get Muff home, but only because he and the Indian guide walked or ran "at least 100 miles" to make up for the diminished pulling strength of the dog train. A critical reader might wonder what this Indian guide thought of dear Muff's special treatment in an inhospitable land where overexertion could mean death.

Scotty Allan, a famous Nome musher, was intimately involved in the politics of developing the new state of Alaska. He trained large numbers of dogs for use by the Allied forces in the Alps in World War I and was elected to the Alaskan Legislature in 1917. He also helped found the first sled dog race in the United States, the All-Alaska Sweepstakes), which ran from 1908 through 1917. It was by far the most closely followed sporting event inside a state whose winters left very few opportunities for diversion. The race went from Nome to Candle and back, a distance of 408 miles, and was followed (and gambled on) by hordes of winter-bound Alaskans and Nomeites, who followed the progress of the dog teams via bulletins by telegraph from the roadhouses along the way.

Allan wrote of the Sweepstakes--possibly refuting a perception that the gambling surrounding it rendered it morally suspect--that it engendered technological innovation: new types of blankets, moccasins, and a new lightweight sled that he designed for his dog team. "We improved sledging technique more in five years than the Eskimos would in five centuries," he boasted. Hudson Stuck, a missionary who traveled extensively in the North by dog sled, and eventually became the first white man to summit Mt. Denali (with extensive help from a Native companion), observed that "The white man found the dog team in use among the natives all over the interior, but he taught the Indian how to drive dogs. The natives had never evolved a 'leader.' Some fleet stripling always ran ahead, and the dogs followed. The leader, guided by the voice 'geeing' and 'hawing,' stopping and advancing at the word of command, is a white man's innovation, though now universally adopted by the natives. So is the dog collar." The organizational superiority of a team led by a single dog would become the stuff of legend, culminating in Balto, the ultimate celebrity leader.

And if the new discipline and sport of white dog mushing had a face, it was the face of Baldy, Scotty Allen's famous lead dog, who won \$25,000 in the All-Alaska Sweepstakes in 1909, 1911, and 1912 and went on to be memorialized in children's books and fictional stories. Was he really homely, ungainly, an unlikely hero--as awkward as his name implies? Or were his ugly-duckling looks overplayed by children's authors in order to emphasize how his less sexy characteristics--his, for lack of a better word, dogged commitment to work and obedience--got him the kind of success a similarly ugly and unwanted child longs for? In the commercial photograph sold by Winter & Pond Co, Juneau, to commemorate his win, he looks like any dog lying in the corner of a room where his humans are eating, shifting uncomfortably in the middle of a half-thought, about to get up and push his nose under your

hand.

In Allan's memoir, *Gold, Men, and Dogs* (1931), he wrote that his famous lead dog had as much trouble going down the street in Juneau unmolested as Britney on her way out of an LA Starbucks. "The tourists and souvenir hunters took to cutting off locks of his hair," he reported. "They soon had him shingled, from the ears to the tail!" Baldy only put up with this treatment, Allan wrote, because his dog "wife," Laska, was proud of his status and would lead him toward the hair-robbers by the strap. ("Had he been alone," Allan knew, "he never would have let them get their hands on him.") Outside of Alaska, Baldy was no less popular: The semi-fictional children's book *Baldy of Nome* (1916), by Allan's business partner Esther Birdsell Darling, went through four printings. Some of the same children who loved Balto, then, might have read Darling's book in their early years.

Of these Baldy stories, one of the most famous is the one in which Baldy joins their racing kennel of Allan and Darling. His owner, Ben, a poor boy who lives in a gold camp outside of Nome with his widowed mother, can't afford to feed him anymore, and hopes that if he sells him to Allan and Darling, who've achieved some local fame around Nome as sled dog racers, then Baldy will have a chance to be a famous lead dog. Initially, nobody thinks much of Baldy--Allan's son says "He don't seem to belong here, someway"--but Allan always believes. "Baldy's self-contained, and it's hard for him to adjust himself to these recent changes," Scotty, in his kind, avuncular juvenile fiction incarnation, says. "You can't watch him with Ben and say that he's not affectionate; but he gives his affection slowly, and to but few people. One must earn it."

Slowly, the aloof and worthy Baldy becomes acclimated to the kennel, learning that there is a division between the racers, who are bred for show and athletic prowess, and the old-school working dogs, personified by Dubby, the elderly lead dog. Dubby is like a canine hangover from Alaska's early, workmanlike, pre-celebrity dog frontier past. Darling writes, from inside Dubby's head: "While Scotty must have had some strange human reason for all of these silly dashes with an absolutely empty sled, in his opinion hauling a boiler up to Hobson Creek would be a far more efficacious means of exercise, and would be a practical accomplishment besides." Dubby is the elder statesman of *Baldy of Nome*, its moral center, a living emblem of the old ways of Alaska--a mythic land where work was prized and modernity, with all its jazz and media, still held at bay. Or, as the children read:

"Dubby was of a generation that knew not racing. Of noted McKenzie River parentage, he came from Dawson, where he was born, down the Yukon to Nome with Scotty Allan. He had led a team of his brothers and sisters, six in all, the entire distance of twelve hundred miles, early manifesting that definite acknowledged mastery over the others that is indispensable in a good leader. He had realized what it meant to be a Pioneer, had penetrated with daring men the waste places in search of fame, fortune and adventure; and had carried the heavy burdens of gold wrested from rock-ribbed mountain, and bouldered river bed. He had helped to take the United States Mail to remote and inaccessible districts, and had sped with the Doctor and Priest to the bedside of the sick or dying in distant, lonely cabins. He and his kind have ever shared the toil of the development of that desolate country that stretches from the ice-bound Arctic to where the gray and sullen waters of Bering Sea break on a bleak and wind-swept shore...Up in the eternal snows of the Alaska of the North, the unknown Alaska--the Alaska of Men and Dogs."

Dubby's valor and lack of flash made him the best possible role model for Baldy--and for the thousands of young ones who read this book.

Dubby teaches Baldy the importance of hard work and perservance, leading him to win the Sweepstakes. But Baldy is a new generation, symbolic of a post-Gold Rush Alaska where

hauling boilers and carrying heavy loads of gold is no longer an occupation for dogs. Nor do they even deliver mail--one of the last occupations for dogs was handed over to the airplane around 1925, giving the bush pilot the working mystique that the musher and his lead dog used to share. Anxieties about modernization and the mechanization of labor coalesced in Dubby's conservative assessment of the uselessness of the racing dogs, whose labor meant only enhanced human leisure, not real achievement. When Dubby dies, Darling writes, "Baldy missed Dubby sorely, for there had grown a firm bond of sympathy between them. The old huskie had learned that a character may dignify a calling, and that a true heart often beats beneath a racing harness." Through acceptance of Baldy, Dubby told humans living through tremendous workplace changes that being a man in the modern world need not mean being a man with a diminished character.

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The men in sled dog books had many dogs, but only one dog of the heart. For explorer, writer, and dog breeder Arthur Walden, that dog was named Chinook. Chinook wasn't an Alaskan dog, though Walden spent time in Alaska in the Gold Rush days, hauling freight with sled dogs. In the best tradition of Gold Rush literati, he wrote an memoir about those days, *Dog-Puncher on the Yukon* (1928), which, among other memorable episodes, features a mind-bending story of a gold-camp production of the very popular nineteenth-century stage version of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, with a malamute puppy playing one of the slave-catching bloodhounds pursuing Eliza across the icy river--but I digress. Walden came back to the southern States to live, but for the rest of his life he involved himself with sled dogs and sled dog racing. He started a kennel in Wonalancet, NH, and built his line of dogs around Chinook, who was born in 1917.

Like Baldy, Chinook merited a mildly fictionalized, wildly anthropomorphizing children's book--*Chinook and his Family*, by New England dog fans and breeders Eva Brunell "Short" Seeley & Martha A. L. Lane (1930). (Seeley and her husband took over Walden's kennel in the 1930s.) Seeley and Lane's book describes how Chinook, like Baldy, was initially not thought of as leader material. Yet Chinook staged a coup and unseated his brother as lead: "Taking the harness in his teeth he jumped up and down, saying as plainly as words could have done: 'Oh, please let me try! Let me show what I can do!' From that day on, he's the leader and the rest of the dogs love to follow him." Unlike Cain's famous blow, this fratricide is rewarded for its initiative. Walden was so enamored of Chinook's sterling qualities that he attempted to breed dogs which were as near to 100% Chinook genetic material as he could make them.

In 1917, Walden took his dogs to Antarctica with Richard Byrd, to provide transportation for his expedition. Chinook was ten years old. One day, as Seeley and Lane tell it, some of the other dogs in the kennel attempted to challenge his leadership by fighting him. Although Chinook had always been able to face down these challenges in the past, this time he lost, and was shamed in front of the dogs he was supposed to lead.

The details of what happened next are fuzzy, but the upshot is clear: Chinook vanished into the bare landscape of Antarctica. (Seeley and Lane insist that he woke Walden up to say goodbye before going, which makes the story a bit more child-friendly.) According to a 1930 article in the *New York Times*, "One day, Chinook failed to come for his quota of frozen seal meat. He was not to be found when the team was harnessed, and one of the men remembered seeing him trotting off toward the cold horizon."

Although Byrd described the vanishing of Chinook as "the saddest during our whole stay in the Antarctic," the self-imposed exile had a tang of drama that was unavoidably tantalizing to readers then--and now. If, like Dubby, you find yourself outmoded, old-fashioned in a world

where newest is best, or if, like Chinook, you lose face, what better way to go than to walk off into the wilderness, where no sons, machines, or managers can touch your innermost soul?

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Even after the dogs were replaced by airplanes, snowmobiles, and automobiles on the Alaskan landscape, the sled dog genre continued for a couple of decades. One author of adventure stories even tried to throw the plane and the dog together, but the result, *Husky: Co-Pilot of the Pilgrim*, was awkward and sad: The lead dog, Husky, whose owner sold the rest of his team in order to buy his bush plane, is relegated to riding shotgun and occasionally biting unscrupulous thieves who threaten his master. But the moment for the sled dog's potency as symbol was over.

Now, mushers pay upwards of \$60,000 to train for and enter the yearly Alaskan Iditarod, and along the trail, according to a recent article in upscale food magazine *Saveur*, enjoy "pan-seared duck breasts with tea and honey sauce and pad thai with Alaskan spot prawn." (A far cry from the Gold Rush days, when bacon and beans were the only things a self-respecting Alaskan neo-native would be caught dead ingesting.) And snowmobiles have replaced dogs in everyday use among most native Alaskans. As for Balto, he showed up again in a Disney movie which came out in 1995, voiced by Kevin Bacon and given a love interest in the form of an attractive collie named Jenna. A meddling goose named Boris and two dumb polar bears named Muk and Luk round out Balto's ragtag crew, which fights to save Jenna's rosy-cheeked child mistress from a gruesome death by diphtheria.

Date

**The Crier**